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Media's role in wilting U.S. foreign policy

Are the news media responsible for weakening American foreign policy? I think we are, partly. The people who run major newspapers and TV networks do tend to be excessively adversarial, arrogant, trendy-liberal, and superficial. But the press alone is hardly to blame for what ails us.

These conclusions arise from my attending a high-powered conference on the media and foreign policy sponsored by the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies at Williamsburg, Va.

By the rules of the conference, I cannot tell who said what, but suffice it to say that the group included foreign policy and media professionals, congressmen, Reagan administration officials, and scholars.

Conservatives in the group repeated the oft-heard case that America as a great power began its decline with the Vietnam War, and that the Vietnam War was lost because the press and television undermined American morale.

No one, thank heavens, repeated the far-right charge that the press is infiltrated by Soviet "agents of influence" who systematically "spike" good news about America and bad news about American adversaries.

A good argument was made, however, that there is a tendency for U.S. media elites to vote and think liberal. The evidence cited was a set of attitudinal studies published in 1981 by Professor Robert Lichter of George Washington University and Stanley Rothman of Smith College.

In the survey of 240 leading correspondents, editors, bureau chiefs, and producers, 81 percent said they had voted for George McGovern in 1972. Fifty-six percent said they thought U.S. economic exploitation contributed to Third World poverty and only 25 percent said the West had helped

the Third World. Ninety percent said a woman should have unimpeded access to abortion.

The Lichter-Rothman study hardly shows this group to be far-left, however. Only 28 percent said U.S. society needs a total overhaul, and 45 percent said the CIA sometimes should undermine foreign governments in the national interest. Only 13 percent said major corporations should be government-owned.

The picture that emerges from the study is that media elites are trendy-liberals, not hard-line ideologues.

They do tend to be arrogant, though. Those surveyed said the media already comprised the second most powerful institution in America, but should be the first.

The Lichter-Rothman study does not prove that media elites translate their political predilections into biased coverage of the news. Journalists do have a professional ethic that requires them to filter out their personal prejudices. At the same time, their view of reality has to affect what they choose to look for when reporting the news.

One George Washington University study shows, for example, that after all the thousands of hours of TV air time accorded to the Vietnam War, there were only 20 minutes total devoted to the genocide in Cambodia during the 1975-1979 period.

A fairly convincing case was made at Williamsburg for charging that the American press tends to be preoccupied with what the American government is doing wrong. Adversarialism has tended in recent years toward negativism. Pulitzer Prizes and front-page play tend to go to exposes of CIA wrongdoing, not KGB activities.

And Americans are getting less consistent on-the-spot coverage of foreign countries. Major media out-

lets had 515 correspondents overseas in 1963 but only 350 today, while the number of foreign correspondents in Washington has doubled.

I think it's probably true, as some press critics charge, that television's penchant for brevity, passion, violence, personalities, and simplistic clashes of good and evil increasingly defines what's news. That does not help develop a sophisticated citizenry in a complex world.

And yet it's simply nonsense to blame the press for all the failures

of American policy, including Vietnam. As distinguished military historian Col. Harry G. Summers has demonstrated, the Vietnam debacle was mainly the result of President Lyndon Johnson's failure to mobilize the American population — militarily, economically, or spiritually — to fight a real war. Mr. Johnson tried, in fact, to fight it on the sly.

Rather than leading the American establishment into believing that the Vietnam War could not — and then, should not —

be won, I think the press reflected establishment thinking. But once American elites made that decision, the press certainly amplified it, went looking for stories to prove the war was wrong, and convinced the country and itself.

Since Vietnam, on foreign policy, the American population has been split deeply between interventionists and neo-isolationists. The press hardly created the split, however, and I'm not sure it has even taken sides. In all its adversarial fairness, the media caused Jimmy Carter's

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